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Girlhood, Disability, and Liminality in Barbara Gowdy's *Mister Sandman**

ABSTRACT: Barbara Gowdy's 1996 novel *Mister Sandman* centers on the mysteriously silent figure of Joan Cannary, a mentally disabled child who yet does not become a spectacle of the grotesque in the mode quite standard for representations of the disabled female figures, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson noticed in her magisterial study *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. In her disability Gowdy's Joan does not constitute a metaphor of the condition of her family, either, despite the transgressions they are prone to devote themselves to. The novel offers an open-minded outlook on transgression as a means of liberating oneself from the social constraints and from the self-imposed limitations. Joan's eternal girlhood makes her a lens for the family members' tendency to transgress against the norms, which is ultimately received with affirmation. Her figure offers a valuable commentary on other texts by Gowdy, which present a discourse on the liminality of human body and on the boundaries of identity.

KEY WORDS: Barbara Gowdy, Canadian novel in English, disability, body, gender.

In their introduction to the essay collection *In Search of a Small Girl* Izabela Kowalczyk and Edyta Zierkiewicz cite Maggie Black, who points to the three categories of humans in the social world: men, women, and girls. The girls tend to remain invisible, or even disappear from the sight of both ordinary people and researchers (KOWALCZYK, I., ZIERKIEWICZ, E., 2003: 12).¹ Their invisibility may be extended onto the aural level: they are not just unseen, but also unheard, and if they do speak, no one seems to listen to their more and more weakening voice.

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I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of Dr. Marylea MacDonald from St Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

¹ Black asks: "So why, when it comes to the professional observation of society, are girls and girlhood almost entirely invisible?" and indicates that gender-consciousness is indispensable when analysing childhood (BLACK, M., 1993).

Girlhood appears to be merely a transitional stage before entering the world of adult women, since girls cannot yet be defined through marriage and childbearing, as women typically are (even though the women's position is lower than that of men), and the position of a misfit leads to the girl's conflict with the society (WHITE, B.A., 1985: 196). The conflict appears natural in the context of the society ignoring adolescent girls and keeping them at the stage of being "not yet" visible, if women may be visible at all. As Ruth O. Saxton claims, physicality remains all-important for a girl's self-definition, since "the girl's experience of her body, engagement in or denial of sex, her cultural value" have become crucial to our perception of girls, which finds its reflection in contemporary fiction (SAXTON, R.O., 1998: xi). Femininity generally exists as a concept characterized as a deviance from the norm instituted by masculinity, while girlhood is in turn a deviance from fully-grown womanhood. The idea of femininity as a deviance must be put on a par with the deviance of disability, as disability studies theoreticians present it. Even though "normalcy and disability are parts of the same system," as Leonard J. DAVIS writes (1995: 2), female and disabled bodies are customarily externalized in our culture in the gesture of "cast[ing] [them] as deviant or inferior," since "both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life" and "both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority" (GARLAND THOMSON, R., 1997: 19). Barbara Gowdy's 1995 novel *Mister Sandman* portrays the figure of Joan Canary, "the Reincarnation Baby" (MS 1), a girl who was dropped onto the floor directly after birth, which probably caused her mental disability, but was "reincarnated" in the sense of surviving the fall.² Joan embodies the two deviances, that of being a girl and that of being what Thomson terms "a cripple," understood as a social taxonomy stigmatizing the bearer of the label (GARLAND THOMSON, R., 1997: 8). Joan will be then doubly defined through her corporeality, while what is customarily marginalized, girlhood and disability, become central to the novel. Gowdy's novel thus calls for a thorough rethinking of the categories of girlhood and of a disfunctional body, while it simultaneously comments on transgression and its liberating potential, even though it is the healthy who transgress against the norms. The interest in transgression that the novel shows counters the one-time Canadian nationalistic queries about, as Peter Dickinson states it, what it means to be Canadian and what it means to be a man (DICKINSON, P., 1999: 17). Here the significant figure in the novel is a girl, while queerness and its ability to "reach 'across' boundaries" (DICKINSON, P., 1999: 37) appear to demonstrate that liminality is a recurrent quality of the world represented in the novel. Transgression is a phenomenon related to liminality, as transgressing often denotes being on the borderline between the "regular" and "the other". Gowdy's novel appears

² All the quotations from *Mister Sandman* will be marked as MS in the brackets and will come from Gowdy's text (GOWDY, B., 1996).

to be “typically Canadian” in this respect, if we insist that Canada suffers from “the borderline non-definability”, as Zuzanna Szatanik expressed it (SZATANIK, Z., 2006: 59).

Importantly, Joan’s portrait is not limited to the image of a freak, marginal to the plot and thus one of the “uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens, whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability’s cultural resonance” (GARLAND THOMSON, R., 1997: 9). Perhaps, contrary to the readers’ expectations and to what Gordon and Doris think, Joan’s body does not symbolize any of her grandparents’ transgressions and faults. She is no metaphor for her family’s disruption, but rather she actively brings about its rebirth and reconsolidation. The author avoids representing the girl in a manner which would be typical for disability, “sentimental, romantic, Gothic, or grotesque” (GARLAND THOMSON, R., 1997: 9), despite the easiness of making something grotesque out of a disabled body.³ As Maria Jesús Hernáez Lerena comments in the context of Gowdy’s collection of short stories, *We So Seldom Look on Love*, the grotesque “disturbs our habit of looking on the human body as a unified and coherent whole by making it appear as a construct, a version of personhood that has deliberately gone astray” (LERENA, M.J.H., 2003: 715). Still, both in the short stories in question and in *Mister Sandman* Gowdy resists the easiness of representing the disabled bodies as spectacles of corporeal fragmentation. Instead, she focuses on those characters’ subtlety of emotions and their typical human needs. Citing Lerena’s comment on *We So Seldom Look on Love*, “social standards have termed these characters disabled or unwanted in different ways, but they keep trying to have access to society’s facilities: motherhood, marriage, friendship, sex” (LERENA, M.J.H., 2003: 726). Joan is no exception to the principle that humanity characterizes even the apparently inhuman, or transhuman, figures in Gowdy’s fiction, not to mention the weird ones, such as Joan.

As a girl Joan should be an object of extensive socialization from her earliest years onwards. Even if girls tend to be invisible in contemporary societies, they are taught that scrutinizing oneself in the mirror is indispensable for the gradual construction of one’s femininity, which is a situation attributable to what Pamela S. Bromberg diagnosed as “the crippling emphasis that society places on the female image as a consumer item” (BROMBERG, P.S., 1988: 13). In *Mister Sandman* the mirror acquires the status of an object signalling Joan’s femininity, since her parents place “a three-foot-high mirror (which from then

³ The grotesque here would probably be present in its ultimate form, “the dissolution of bodies, forms, and categories”, as Frances S. Connelly writes (CONNELLY, F.S., 2003: 2). She comments that “grotesque [...] describes the aberration from ideal form or from accepted correction, to create the misshapen, ugly, exaggerated, or even formless” and it may also include “the deliberate exaggerations of caricature, [...] the unintended aberrations, accidents, and failures of the everyday world represented in realist imagery” (CONNELLY, F.S., 2003: 2).

on she always sat facing so that at least she now faced the door as well)” (MS 56) in the closet which she chose for herself as a place to stay in. The object becomes simultaneously a symbol of the social expectations towards girls and of Joan’s incapability (but perhaps also unwillingness) to realize that function. Paradoxically, she will remain a girl, both physically and mentally, forever, despite her inability to act “girlish.” Conversely, girlishness was a quality detectable in other characters even at the time she was born, starting with Doris’ “breathy little-girl voice” (MS 4) and her infantile lies, and ending with the naivety of ignorant Sonja, who was Joan’s biological mother and whose pregnancy resulted from a date rape, and the carefree pursuit of sexual pleasure by teenaged Marcy.

Joan remains outside the system that imposes beauty terror and “feminine” behaviour on women. The symbolism of mirror image becomes enhanced through another telling scene: that when Joan is “preoccupied with her reflection in the mirrored picture frame on the table beside her” (MS 78) when visiting the place of Grandma Gayler, Doris’ mother. Obviously, she appears to do that out of curiosity rather than vanity, while the latter type of behaviour is even expected of girls in contemporary culture. Joan does not even have a girlish body to boast herself of: her corporeality appears ideally transparent, almost a body without properties. Her “mother,” indeed being her grandmother, Doris, “attributed everything to the brain damage. Joan’s inability to talk it goes without saying, but also her reclusiveness, her sensitivity to light, her size, her colouring [...] you name it” (MS 1). The “unearthly” (MS 1) qualities of Joan’s appearance include the following: “She was born with those pale green eyes, and the hair on her head, when it finally grew in, was like milkweed tuft. That fine, that white. And look how tiny she was! Nobody in the family was tiny. *Nobody in the family was anything like her*, her real parents least of all. Sonja was fat, and had dark brown corkscrew hair and brown eyes. The real father was an orange-haired giant, eyes a flat creamy blue like seat-cover plastic. He had remarkably white skin, and Joan did, too, but without the freckles, pimples and hair. *Flawless, Joan was flawless. Another way of saying not like any of them* [italics mine — A.C.]” (MS 1). The newborn girl distinguishes herself from the rest of her family through her physicality, since she is everything they are not. Also in contrast to them, she remains mute, while they voice all their secrets and grievances in the room where her closet is situated. Through her muteness she negates the social expectations towards girls: that they should prattle and generally display extraordinary talents as far as language development is concerned. Still, Joan does communicate with the outside world through reproducing sounds: “When she was about eighteen months old [...] Joan was doing amazing impressions of creaking hinges, screeching tires, radio static [...] she cooed or chirped or mooed or gobbled or made some other animal sound” (MS 53). Individual family members could

even have conversations with her, as when Gordon asked: “‘Did Daddy just say something?’ [...] She’ll nod or shake her head. Or moo. Or click her tongue” (MS 118).

Joan perennially remains a girl; consequently, she does not undergo the socializing process of “girling.” Butler describes the process as that when the girl is “brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender” (BUTLER, J., 1993: 7). The social expectations towards girls seem particularly strident, but Joan as a disabled child is not subject to it. The medical diagnosis paradoxically allows the girl to develop her talents, since not much is expected of her in terms of mental development. Once perceived as a wonder, she begins to be viewed as somebody affected with a serious medical condition: “The nature of the damage was scar tissue, almost certainly from the fall at birth. The scar tissue was fickle. It enhanced certain abilities but interfered with others, mainly the ability to vocalize words. So although Joan could reproduce certain sounds and could understand what was said to her, she couldn’t talk and likely never would” (MS 61). Joan, who would otherwise be expected to say the right things at the right time, as all girls are, does not have to enter the domain of language, since the medical discourse referring to her condition excludes her from it. The disability frees her of the duties related to the linguistic aspect of socialization. She remains within the sphere of the maternal due to her inability to master the “masculine” language of power and control and thus become subject to the Law-of-the-Father understood in Lacanian terms. Gordon even suspected her of refusing to talk the “paternal” language: he deduced “that she was deliberately forswearing words out of an instinctive sense that it took only one to flatten you. On his bad days he wondered if her muteness wasn’t highly evolved” (MS 70). She prefers music to human language since the former remains more accessible to her; otherwise she communicates by uttering bestial, that is inhuman or transhuman, noises. Also because of that mode of communicating she remains a mystery, since other family members do not realize what she understands out of all the things she is told. In this respect *Mister Sandman* becomes another instance of Barbara Gowdy’s discourse on human body and identity. To cite Tomasz Sikora writing about *We So Seldom Look on Love*, in Gowdy’s fiction “the body is eternally unfinished, unclosed, unstable. Behind this instability of the body there lies the instability of individual identity as well as the instability of the category ‘human’ in general” (SIKORA, T., 2008: 173). Joan’s body visualizes the condition all bodies are in: the state of permanent fluctuation, the liminality of all their borders. Her body fluctuates even in the sense of being incessantly suspended between life and death, since her behaviour would otherwise be diagnosed as narcolepsia if not for the fact that, as doctors maintained, “pretending to be asleep was typical agoraphobic behaviour” (MS 76). Joan’s periodical death-in-life condition is thus ironically summarized by the narra-

tor: "Joan doesn't need to climb into a coffin to imitate a corpse" (*MS* 157). The body of the girl may therefore be seen as situated in-between life and death, with appearances of the latter condition adopted as a convenient way of avoiding interaction in the situations uncomfortable for her, such as when she is forced to leave home.

Bodies not only mirror the world around them, as Judith Butler indicates, but they also adjust themselves to it through the movement of their boundaries, which thus exposes the liminality of all corporeality: "Not only [...] [do] bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appear[s] to be quite central to what bodies 'are'" (BUTLER, J., 1993: ix). Joan's relatives do not have access to the knowledge about her actual physical or mental condition; therefore, they do not know the boundaries of her selfhood. The Canaries can at least designate specific spatial boundaries for the "baby who inspired adoration even in the blind" (*MS* 22): as a child who does not appear to need contact with the outside world she is kept in a closet of her own choice, which is made "more hospitable" by her grandparents (*MS* 56). The recurrent theme of Joan's liminality extends our discussion of human body's and human identity's instability to the question of who the child in *Mister Sandman* really is, a genius or "a cripple". Firstly thought of as a prodigy and then a child different from others, she combines those two types of identity, which is best summarized by Doris: "You can be a genius in one part of your brain and still be brain-damaged in another part" (*MS* 120). Any labelling is exposed as inadequate if one aspires to capture the identity of others. Joan, simultaneously a mentally disabled person and a genius, finds an alternative mode of self-expression when she commences to play the piano without being coached in any way. Music appears as a more innocent discourse than human speech, the latter being the mode of expression that other family members constantly abuse when they lie about their lives to one another. The term "the Reincarnation baby" that was applied to Joan from her birth onwards acquires yet another dimension when she becomes what Doris calls "Mozart reincarnated" (*MS* 81): a child prodigy unable to live fully without playing music. Furthermore, hyper-sensitive to everything and seeing the world as vibrating, she views herself as immovable: "As far as Joan can tell everything vibrates like something else. The exceptions are corpses, music and herself" (*MS* 181). At the age of fifteen she is a human "frozen in a six-year-old's body" (*MS* 228) and hence suspended between girlhood and adulthood.

Joan as a literary character materializes the Can. Lit. interest in the phenomenon of in-betweenness conceived as "exploring in-between spaces that map out a territory between the extremities of the self and the other, the sublime and the abject, the real and the virtual", to quote Justin Edwards (EDWARDS, J.D., 2005: xv). She functions as the Lacanian other (as opposed to the Other) for the rest of the characters so that they could define themselves against her and as a literary

character she calls for a re-examination of the role of the abject in our culture.⁴ The girl demonstrates instability of gender categories in the family, since it is owing to her that secrets about their sexual lives are revealed. The secrets involve homosexual (or rather: bisexual) parents posing as those who adhere to the heterosexual matrix or the nymphomaniac Marcy concealing her real life from others. Interestingly, Marcy's dream about a talking baby occurs to be prophetic: "The dream that invariably wakes [Marcy] up these nights is the talking-baby one. It's not her baby, it's not her mother's, either. If only she woke up she could remember what the baby said, then she might know who it belonged to. She's not certain but she thinks it's a girl" (*MS* 43). The dream involves the truth about Sonja as Joan's biological mother and presages the time when the girl will "talk" to the family, transcending the limitations of her body and transgressing against the principle that children should not interfere in their parents' intimate lives. Joan will not use her own voice, but their voices recorded on a tape recorder and her transgression will occur to be liberating.

Joan Canary appears to be a more complex version of another character from Gowdy's fiction, namely, Terry from *Body and Soul*, one of the stories in *We So Seldom Look on Love*. Terry also acquires the status of a marvel at her birth, when she is born "bald and blind and with a birthmark covering most of the left side of her face" (*WSSLL* 4), and lives her life of an abandoned child, developing a tactile hyper-sensitivity that makes up for her lack of eyesight.⁵ Terry functioned on the margin of the society also because she had "fingers like antennae. She could extend her hand and sense if another person was in the room. By the air currents passing through her fingers, she could tell if somebody was breathing in her direction" (*WSSLL* 5). The unusual cognition of the reality, rendering her body luminal, since one does not know where her body finishes, allows her to experience it more fully and understand more, perhaps through sensing things rather than, as it would normally be the case, seeing them. Like Joan Canary, Terry knows some things exist even though you cannot see them; hence what you can see does not reflect the entirety of being, as the girl from *Body and Soul* realizes when she regains eyesight after surgery and gets disappointed that such things as time do not materially exist. There are also things concealed from human eyesight, Joan knows, but in order to realize them your body has to develop extra-normal skills. The quality of being "high-strung," which Joan (*MS* 55) and Terry (*WSSLL* 5) share, paradoxically allows them to adjust to the surrounding world more adequately: they are always alert to other people and their needs and fully aware of all that happens around them, in contrast to what "normal" humans see and what they

⁴ Natalie Wilson's study explores the political function of the abject in Gowdy's *Mister Sandman* and Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (WILSON, N., 2001: 109—121).

⁵ All the quotations from *We So Seldom Look on Love* will be marked as *WSSLL* in the brackets and will come from Gowdy's text (GOWDY, B., 1992).

choose to disregard. Their bodies demonstrate the benefits of human bodies developing extra-normal skills and thus transcending the limits of a conventionally perceived "human." Justin Edwards maintains that in all Gowdy's fiction human body undergoes changes; its boundaries are extended in order to form a unique vessel for each identity:

For writers such as [...] Barbara Gowdy [...] anatomy is not necessarily substantial with destiny — the body as an accessory of presence, raw material to fashion and redefine, and a site that can merge with other forms of animal life or technological advancement [...] the body often signals a troubling disturbance in sensory registers, for the corporeal is a variable geometric medium of an identity that remains revocable.

EDWARDS, J.D., 2005: 152

Terry develops insect-like touch, whereas in the more realistic *Mister Sandman* Joan's natural skills for memorizing confessions of the others become enhanced by the technological device of a tape recorder. A trivial device becomes a perfected version of human memory, which otherwise tends to distort recollections in accordance with the expectations of the one who remembers. Thus an objective voice is constructed, making up for Joan's speechlessness. A disabled child comes up with the creative idea of composing music out of the voices of those she listens to and of her own voice, present only in the humming: "She doesn't have to listen to the tapes to know that on all of them, in the background, is the sound of herself humming to the hum of the tape recorder. So if her humming stands for Mister Sandman, voices of all her darlings will be in the music!" (MS 189). Joan, as a disabled character, overturns the meaning of the categories belonging to what Rosemarie Garland Thomson calls "the disability system," which "functions to preserve and validate such privileged designations as beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, intelligent" (GARLAND THOMSON, R., 2004: 77).

The literal closet usually occupied by the girl may be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of the closeted life that Doris and Gordon, repressed homosexuals, lead. Thus the girl's life in confinement replicates the pattern designated by her adoptive parents' concealed sexuality. Furthermore, if she is mute, so are they, since they do not tell each other anything significant about their lives. Keeping silent about one's real needs and character seems for the Canaries the only strategy for smooth but superficial family interactions. The strategy of keeping mute about one's true identity is transferred from the parents, ignorant of each other's sexual orientation, to the two daughters: Sonja, a rape victim, and Marcia, obsessed with sex already in her teenage years, but carefully concealing the fixation. Doris and Gordon commit their transgressions in secret, while the latter character even blames himself for Joan's disability, when he reflects: "Jesus, what if she's slow because he's queer?" (MS 119). Nev-

ertheless, the secrecy about transgressions occurs to be disruptive to the family unity, but the transgressions themselves do not seem to break that unity. The two homosexuals transcend the limitations imposed on them by the morality system of the society they live in. Transgression denotes for them a trip beyond the limitations and beyond the stifling rules of “respectable behaviour” hailed in the Canada of the late 1950s and the early 1960s, a trip which allows them to regain real understanding of their own identity and of who the others are. Able-bodied Doris and Gordon rebel against the norm, here of compulsory heterosexuality. Disability, elsewhere conducive to rebellion against the concept of “normalcy,” does not breed dissent.⁶ It is the healthy who rebel against the social norms. Peter Dickinson indicates that in Can. Lit. the resistance to the norms (in his study those of “a heteronormative nationalism”) does not have to come from those who are expected to break them (DICKINSON, P., 1999: 5). Whether Joan and Gordon are heterosexual or homosexual (they define themselves as both) does not matter as much as their dissent against the social norms does. Through their transgressions they visibly rebel against what Katherine Monk defined as the following: “We [Canadians — A.C.] are a sexually closeted culture” (MONK, K., 2001: 164). The closeting means for Monk that all sex in Canadian culture is presented as “weird” (as she emphasizes even in the title of her study, *Weird Sex and Snowshoes and Other Canadian Film Phenomena*). Consequently, any desire, be it heterosexual or homosexual, is treated in Canadian culture with a degree of uneasiness, which films illustrate so well. Furthermore, she demonstrates that homosexual desire expresses this Canadian uneasiness about sexuality best. The closeting of (homosexual) desire is perhaps most fully expressed in *Mister Sandman* by Doris, who reveals to Gordon that she “kept it [her homosexuality] under wraps [...] and there were a lot of dry years there before [she] took the plunge” (MS 262).

Doris and Gordon’s transgressions against the heterosexual matrix demonstrate the fluidity of gender categories (since, despite their queerness, the couple does not cease to love each other) and the liminality of all gender behaviour. Do the two adults cross the borders of acceptable behaviour because they enter other erotic relationships, or do they do it because they are not truthful towards each other? Also their relationship, based on (platonic) love despite the homosexual transgressions on both sides, demonstrates that the in-betweenness is not just a quality characterizing Joan as a character, but also other characters in this novel, since they are constantly suspended between their expected social roles and their desired identities. Dickinson observes that in-betweenness and the interest in it may be a quality of all post-national, postcolonial, and postmodernist

⁶ Kat, a character from Margaret Gowdy’s story “Hairball” (ATWOOD, M., 1991), develops a hairball which, as Sally Chivers insists, “drives her character to rebel against the norm, against the containment within constructing narratives available to women” (CHIVERS, S., 2006: 395).

Canadian fiction (DICKINSON, P., 1999: 37), which would make *Mister Sandman* an instance of this type of writing. Joan's presence only appears to be a lens for the transgressions within her family and the liminality of gender identities in it.

Despite her disability and the menial social position characterizing girls, Joan is capable of reincarnating the family structure distorted by the lies all of them fabricate about themselves. She records the family members' confessions, treating the words as a jigsaw puzzle. Like most artists she creates in solitude: "she sits in virtual darkness and tracks through the tapes. Listening, stopping, rewinding, listening, stopping. Since she wears earphones and has made it clear that the tapes are her private property, nobody could swear on the Bible as to what they contain, but even Marcia takes it for granted that it must be Joan playing the piano" (MS 205). Seen only as an amateur artist reproducing the work of genuine creators such as Mozart, Joan invents a music of her own, which will combine individual histories of the ones she loves into a single tune of sincere confession and the one expressing regret that they lied to the others about their real identities. Joan's role for the family unity becomes confirmed when Gordon realizes that the silent girl was not a therapeutic instrument for them, but that she rather treated other family members as instruments:

"We were her instrument," Gordon says quietly. This he truly believes and is in awe of.

"We were her *audience*," Marcia says.

MS 260

Joan played on their voices as if they were her orchestra and then made them her audience when she made them listen to the original work, the "music" hailing understanding and truthfulness in the family relationships. The girl, however, does not condemn the Canaries for their transgressions: she accepts her family members as they are and thus affirms family love, regardless of individual differences.

Still, should Joan join Gowdy's "unfinished bodies and minds" from *We So Seldom Look on Love*, as Lerena calls them (LERENA, M.J.H., 2003: 715)? Terry and Julie, the characters from *Body and Soul*, were, according to Lerena, "unfinished in body" since the former was blind and her face deformed with a birthmark, while the latter was "unfinished in mind" in her mental retardation. Yet the brain-damaged Joan simultaneously belongs to both of the categories in her speechlessness and eternal girlishness, and to neither of them since she is the only member of the Canary family complete in her development. Both her body and mind are at peace, in contrast with the bodies of the rest tormented by uncontrollable desire and thus not harmonized with their souls. Joan lives her life the way she desires to live it, while other family members get entangled in the social expectations and in what they think their duties are. Due to her passion of storing the memories of others, she is capable of constructing the collective

memory of the entire family, bringing them together again after the long period of psychological dispersion. Her body, complemented by the tape recorder that becomes an almost inseparable part of her, becomes a symbolic site of family history. The Canaries, united in their love for Joan, agree that what she recorded demonstrates who they really are: her work amalgamates their individual histories in order to form a collective one, diversified as it is. Disability signals transcendence, while the “normal” characters only transgress against the social norms of the times they live in, but have no access to the transcendence.

Again the aural is foregrounded instead of the specular sphere, more usual in the cultural texts about “freakery.” Joan’s performance is not a visual spectacle, but a musical one. Thus she stands in contrast to the “freak show” for the readers that the bodies from *We So Seldom Look on Love* participate in, or to those characters who, like the four-legged titular figure of *Sylvie*, choose to become a part of the side show, as it is a place where their differences find affirmation instead of ridicule. Joan’s disabled body seems to form the centre of the family life in the end, while her aural performance teaches a lesson to other Canaries: that there is more to their family life than meets the eye. Till that moment her message simply remains unintelligible to them, but now it reveals its purifying quality. At the early stage of her life Joan was judged by her physicality; at the end of the novel she reveals her maturity and wisdom, since she is granted a voice of her own at last. Her perennial girlhood ceases to be a quality which might exclude her from life: the unfortunate fall at birth, which led to her disability, endowed her with a more complete existence.

Affirmation of the family bonds finds its fullest expression at the stage when Joan becomes a real “Reincarnation baby”: she nearly dies, but miraculously regains life and becomes even more central to the emotional dynamics of the Canaries’ mutual relations. Thus again she straddles the borders between life and death. Her final “reincarnation” confirms that of the entire family. The reincarnation is not merely a euphemism for “disabled,” as initially Sonja thought (“If Joan was either brain-damaged or reincarnated, Sonja preferred reincarnated”) (*MS* 1). Joan’s perennial girlhood finds its affirmation despite, or perhaps especially due to, the visible difference that she embodies. Her body, abjected from the social world because of her superficially conceived maladjustment, integrates the family and restores order in it once the uncontrollable, transgressive desires that reign their own bodies are realized by them. Transgression thus becomes an attempt of the body to go beyond the crippling effects of the socialization and consequently to be able to find inner peace. The dissolution of family bonds is suspended and the emotional links between the people reintegrated.

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